

By Franco Ordonez

WASHINGTON Mel Dickens, 84, got choked up with emotion Wednesday as the bus pulled toward the National World War II Memorial. The WWII former Army corporal from Raleigh got off the bus and strode through the plaza punctuated by granite pillars hung with bronze wreaths. He took a moment to reflect on the 4,048 gold stars that line the west side of the memorial, each representing a hundred Americans who died in the war. He stopped to take a photo at the reflecting pool and gazed at the fountain with the Washington Monument towering behind it.

"This is amazing," he said. "I don't usually get emotional like this."

Dickens then turned to another WWII veteran, former Staff Sgt. Bob Hendrix, 89.

"There it is, North Carolina," he said. "Come on, Bob, get up under there." Dickens and Hendrix were among a group of 120 aging World War II veterans who flew aboard the last "honor flight" to Washington from the military-heavy state of North Carolina. The free trips include visits to "their" memorial and several other monuments. The trips are beginning to dwindle as time runs out on WWII veterans who are still healthy enough to travel.

In the weeks leading up to Wednesday's flight, eight of the World War II veterans who'd been booked on the trip had to cancel for health reasons. Triangle Flight of Honor director Sunny Johnson said they'd had veterans die within three days of their scheduled flights.

"Our goal was to get as many WWII veterans here as we could," she said. "This is the last flight for North Carolina. The biggest reason is that we're running out of veterans who have either not flown or are healthy enough to take a full day – it's about a 14-hour day – in Washington."

Triangle Flight of Honor is separate from the well-known national organization Honor Flight Network. That group, which flies out of Charlotte, already has ended its World War II trips from North Carolina.

Of the more than 16 million Americans who served during World War II, fewer than 2 million are alive today. Estimates are that this generation is dying at a rate of 1,000 a day.

It took 60 years after World War II ended for the memorial to be built, and many of the war's veterans have never seen it. The trip is a chance for veterans such as Rene Butler of Charlotte, who's 90, to share a day with other veterans, trade stories and finally see the memorial built in their honor. Many also are getting the welcome-home celebrations they never received. Butler, a former Air Force pilot, said the only one who'd greeted him in 1945 after he'd served two years escorting bombers was the Statue of Liberty.

On Wednesday, he and the other veterans were welcomed to Washington by a 50-member barbershop-style chorus singing patriotic songs and hundreds of supporters who wanted to shake their hands, including Sen. Richard Burr, a Winston-Salem Republican, and U.S. Rep. David Price, a Chapel Hill Democrat.

"Everyone is thanking me," Butler said. "I want to thank everyone else. I can't believe what everyone is doing for us. "

The handshakes, pats on the back and thank-you's continued throughout the day as the group came into contact with more people at the Iwo Jima Memorial, the U.S. Air Force Memorial and Arlington National Cemetery.

Hailey Ward, age 12, asked Dickens and Hendrix whether she and some of her friends could have their photo taken with them.

"I just thought it was important to introduce myself so they know we appreciate what they did," said Hailey, who was visiting from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. "I want them to feel special."

For each veteran on the plane, the trip was special. For Swede Boreen, 91, of Pinehurst, it was an opportunity to reflect on those who never made it back.

Although the number of World War II veterans is dwindling, the honor flights may continue, in a way.

Groups such as Triangle Flight of Honor and the Honor Flight Network have considered turning their attention to a younger generation: veterans of the Korean and Vietnam wars.